

# The Story of WAITSTILL BAXTER



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Kate Douglas Wiggin

KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

Author of "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm"

CHAPTER XV.  
A BRACE OF LOVERS.

How the cat had lived mebbe she'd been better company, on the whole, than the dog. There had been plenty of rain all the season, and the countryside was looking so fresh and green as an emerald. The hillsides were already clothed with a verdant growth of the red grass and—

The red grass of the cardinal flowers. How motionless upon the upright stalks. How they glinted in the meadows, grasses and along the brookside, like brilliant flecks of flame, giving a new beauty to the meadows that Waitstill carried or sent to Mrs. Boynton every week.

To the eye of the casual observer life in the two little villages by the river's brink went on as peacefully as ever, but there were subtle changes taking place nevertheless. Cephas Cole had "asked" the second time and again had been refused by Patty, so that even a very idiot for hopefulness could not urge his father to put another story on the shelf.

"If it turns out to be Phoebe Day," thought Cephas dolefully, "two rooms is plenty good enough, an' I shan't block up the door that leads from the main part, neither, as I thought likely I should. If so be it's got to be Phoebe, not Patty, I shan't care whether mother troops out 'n' in or not." And Cephas dealt out rice and tea and coffee with so languid an air and made such frequent mistakes in weighing the sugar that he drew upon himself many a sharp rebuke from the deacon.

"Of course I'd climb him over the head with a salt fish twice a day under ordinary circumstances," Cephas confided to his father, with a vainglorious air that never won in Deacon Baxter's presence. "But I've got a reason, known to nobody but myself, for wanting to stan' well with the old man for a spell longer. If ever I quit wantin' to stan' well with him he'll get his consequence short and sudden!"

"Speakin' o' standin' well with folks, Phil Perry's kind o' makin' up to Phoebe Baxter, ain't he, Cephas?" asked Uncle Bart guardedly. "Mebbe you wouldn't notice it, hevin' no particular interest, but your mother's kind o' got the idee into her head lately, an' she's terrible farsighted."

"I guess it's so," Cephas responded gloomily. "It's his n'it an' thick 'twixt him an' Mark Wilson. That girl draws 'em as molasses does flies. She does it 'bout like a finger to, no more in the molasses does. She just sits 'n' n'it 'n' it. An' all the time she's n'it n'it, a flatterin' little redheaded spitfire that don't know a good husband when she sees one. The feller that fits her will live to regret it, that's my opinion." And Cephas thought to himself, "Good Lord, don't I wish I was re-arrangin' it this very minute!"

"I s'pose a girl like Phoebe Day'd be considerable less trouble to live with," ventured Uncle Bart.

"I never could take any fancy to that sort o' feller. I like the color well enough when I'm peelin' it off a corn cob, but I don't like it on a girl's head," objected Cephas hypercritically. "An' her eyes ain't got enough blue in 'em to be blue. They're just like skim milk. An' she keeps her mouth open a little more all the time, just as if she wasn't no good duff through, an' was a-tryin' to spit air. An' 'twas me that begun callin' her 'Phoebe Phoebe' in school, an' the scholars'll never forget it. They'd throw it up to me the whole 'durin' time if I should go to work an' keep company with her."

"Mebbe they've forgot by this time," Uncle Bart responded hopefully. "Though it's an awful risk when you think o' Companion Pike! Samuel, he was baptized and Sammie he continued to be, till he married the Wilder Bixby from Waterboro. But as how there wasn't nothin' partic'larly attractive 'bout him—though he was as nice a feller as ever lived—somebody asked her why she married him, an' she said he'd just died an' she wanted a companion. The boys never let go o' that story! Samuel Pike he ceased to be thirty years ago, an' Companion Pike he's remained up to this instant minute!"

"He ain't lived up to his name much," remarked Cephas. "He's to home for his meals, but I guess his

wife never sees him between times." "If the cat had lived mebbe she'd been better company, on the whole," chuckled Uncle Bart. "Companion was allers kind o' dreamy an' absent minded from a boy. I remember askin' him what his wife's Christian name was (she bein' a stranger to Riverboro), an' he said he didn't know! Said he called her Miss Bixby afore he married her an' Miss Pike afterwards!"

"Well, there's something terrible queer 'bout this marryin' business," and Cephas drew a sigh from the heels of his boots. "It seems 's if a man hadn't no natcher drawin' towards a girl with a good farm 'n' stock that was willin' to have him! Seems jest as if it set him ag'in' her somehow! And yet, if you've got to sing out o' the same book with a girl your whole lifetime, it does seem 's if you'd ought to have a kind o' a fancy for her at the start, anyhow!"

"You may feel dif'rent as time goes on, Cephas, an' come to see Phoebe—I would say Phoebe—as your mother

does. The best fire don't flare up the soonest, you know." But old Uncle Bart said that his son's heart was heavy and forebore to press the subject.

Annabel Franklin had returned to Boston after a month's visit and to her surprise had returned as disengaged as she came. Mark Wilson, thoroughly bored by her vacillations of mind, longed now for more intercourse with Patty Baxter, Patty, so gay and unexpected; so lively to talk with, so plucking to the fancy, so skittish and difficult to manage, so temptingly pretty, with a beauty all her own, and never two days alike.

There were many lions in the way, and these only added to the zest of pursuit. With all the other girls of the village opportunities multiplied, but he could scarcely get ten minutes alone with Patty. The deacon's orders were absolute in regard to young men. His daughters were never to drive or walk alone with them, never to go to dances or "trouts" of any sort and never receive them at the house, this last mandate being quite unnecessary, as no youth in his right mind would have gone a-courtin' under the deacon's forbidding gaze. And still there were sudden, delicious chances to be seized now and then if one had his eyes open and his wits about him. There was the walk to or from the singing school, when a sentimental couple could drop a few feet at least behind the rest and exchange a word or two in comparative privacy; there were the church "circles" and prayer meetings and, when Mark could detach Patty a moment from the group on the meeting house steps. More valuable than all these, a complete schedule of Patty's various movements here and there, together with a profound study of Deacon Baxter's habits, which were disagreeable, permitted Mark many stolen interviews, as sweet as they were brief. There was never a second kiss, however, in these casual meetings and partings. The first, in springtime, had found Patty a child, surprised, unprepared. She was a woman now, for it does not take years to achieve that miracle; months would do it or days or even hours. Her summer's experience with Cephas Cole had wonderfully broadened her powers, giving her an assurance sadly lacking before, as well as a knowledge of detail, a certain finished skill in the management of a lover, which she could apply on any and every man who happened to come along. And at the moment any one who happened

to come along served the purpose admirably, Philip Perry as well as Marquis Wilson.

Young Perry's interest in Patty, as we have seen, began with his alienation from Ellen Wilson, the first object of his affections, and it was not at the outset at all of a sentimental nature. Philip was a pillar of the church, and Ellen had proved so entirely lacking in the religious sense, so self-satisfied as to her standing with the heavenly powers, that Philip dared not expose himself longer to her society lest he find himself "unequally yoked together with an unbeliever," thus defying the scriptural admonition as to marriage.

Patty, though somewhat lacking in the qualities that go to the making of trustworthy saints, was not, like Ellen, wholly given over to the fleshpots and would prove a valuable convert, Philip thought, one who would reflect great credit upon him if he succeeded in inducing her to subscribe to the stern creed of the day.

Philip was a very strenuous and slightly gloomy believer, dwelling considerably on the wrath of God and the doctrine of eternal punishment. There was an old "pennyroyal" hymn much in use which describes the general tenor of his meditation—

My thoughts on awful subjects roll—  
Damnation and the deed,  
What horrors seize the guilty soul!  
Upon a dying bed!

(No wonder that Jacob Cochrane's lively songs, cheerful, hopeful, militant and bracing, fell with a pleasing sound upon the ear of the believer of that epoch.) The love of God had, indeed, entered Philip's soul, but in some mysterious way had been ossified after it got there. He had intensely black hair, dark skin and a liver that disposed him constitutionally to an abject belief in the necessity of hell for most of his neighbors and the hope of spending his own glorious immortality in a small, properly restricted and prudently managed heaven. He was eloquent at prayer meeting and Patty's only objection to him there was in his disposition to allude to himself as a "rebel worm," with frequent references to his "evil body." Otherwise when not engaged in theological discussion Patty liked Philip very much. His own father, although an orthodox member of the fold in good and regular standing, had "doctored" Phil conscientiously for his liver from his youth up, hoping in time to incite in him a sunnier view of life, for the doctor was somewhat skilled in adapting his remedies to spiritual maladies. Jed Morrill had always said that when old Mrs. Buxton, the champion convert of Jacob Cochrane, was at her worst, keeping her whole family awake nights by her hysterical fears for their future—Dr. Perry had given her a twelfth of a grain of tartar emetic five times a day until she had entire mental relief, and her anxiety concerning the salvation of her husband and children was set completely at rest.

The good doctor noted with secret pleasure his son's growing fondness for the society of his prime favorite, Miss Patience Baxter. "He'll begin by trying to save her soul," he thought. "Phil always begins that way, but when Patty gets him in hand he'll remember the existence of his heart, an organ he has never taken into consideration. A love affair with a pretty girl, good but not too pious, will help Phil considerably, however it turns out."

There is no doubt but that Phil was taking his chances and that under Patty's tutelage he was growing milder. As for Patty, she was only amusing herself and trifling like a young lamb in pastures where she had young strayed before. Her fancy flew from Mark to Phil and from Phil back to Mark again, for at the moment she was just a vessel of emotion, ready to empty herself on she knew not what. Temperamentally, she would take advantage of currents rather than steer at any time, and it would be the strongest current that would finally bear her away. Her idea had always been that she could play with fire without burning her own fingers and that the flames she kindled were so innocent and mild that no one could be harmed by them. She had fancied up to now that she could control, urge on or cool down a man's feeling forever and a day if she chose and remain mistress of the situation. Now, after some weeks of weighing and balancing her two swains, she found herself confronting a choice once and for all. Each of them seemed to be approaching the state of mind where he was likely to say, somewhat violently, "Take me or leave me, one or the other!" But she did not wish to take them, and still less did she wish to leave them, with no other lover in sight but Cephas Cole, who was almost, though not quite, worse than none.

If matters had not of masculine patience and self-control did come to a crisis, what should she say definitely to either of her suitors? Her father despised Mark Wilson a trifle more than any young man on the river, and while he could have no objection to Phil Perry's character or position in the world, his hatred of old Dr. Perry amounted to a disease. When the doctor had closed the eyes of the third Mrs. Baxter he had made some plain and unwelcome statements that would rankle in the deacon's breast as long as he lived. Patty knew, therefore, that the chance of her father's blessing falling upon her union with either of her present lovers was more than uncertain, and of what use was an engagement if that could not be a marriage?

If Patty's mind inclined to a somewhat speedy departure from her father's household she can hardly be blamed, but she felt that she could not carry any of her indecisions and fears to her sister for settlement. Who could look in Waitstill's eye, steady eyes and say, "I can't make up my mind which to marry?" Not Patty. She felt, instinctively, that Waitstill's heart, if it moved at all, would rush out like a great river to lose itself in the ocean and, losing itself, forget the narrow

banks through which it had flowed before. Patty knew that her own love was at the moment nothing more than the note of a child's penny flute and that Waitstill was perhaps vibrating secretly with a deeper, richer music than could ever come to her. Still, music of some sort she meant to feel. "Even if they make me decide one way or another before I am ready," she said to herself, "I'll never say 'yes' till I'm more in love than I am now!"

There were other reasons why she did not want to ask Waitstill's advice. Not only did she shrink from the loving scrutiny of her sister's eyes and the gentle probing of her questions, which would fix her own motives on a pin point and hold them up unbecomingly to the light, but she had a foolish, generous loyalty that urged her to keep Waitstill quite aloof from her own little private perplexities.

"She will only worry herself sick," thought Patty. "She won't let me marry without asking father's permission, and she'd think she ought not to aid me in deceiving him, and the tempest would be twice as dreadful if it fell upon us both! Now, if anything happens, I can tell father that I did it all myself and that Waitstill knew nothing about it whatever. Then—oh, joy!—if father is too tender to tell me, I shall be a married woman and I can never say, 'I will not permit such cruelty!' Waitstill is dependent upon you no longer; she shall come at once to my husband and me!"

This latter phrase almost intoxicated Patty, so that there were moments when she could have run up to Milliken's mills and purchased herself a husband at any cost, had her slender savings permitted the best in the market, and the more impersonal the husband the more delightedly Patty rolled the phrase under her tongue.

"I can never be 'published' in church," she thought, "and perhaps nobody will ever care enough about me to brave father's displeasure and insist on running away with me. I do wish somebody would care 'rightfully' about me enough for that, enough to help me make up my mind, so that I could just drive up to father's store some day and say, 'Good afternoon, father! I knew you'd never let me marry!' There was always a dash here in Patty's imaginary discourses, a dash that could be filled in with any Christian name according to her mood of the moment—"so I just married him anyway and you needn't be angry with my sister, for she knew nothing about it. My husband and I are sorry if you are displeased, but there's no help for it, and my husband's home will always be open to Waitstill whatever happens."

Patty, with all her latent love of flattery and ease, did not weigh the worldly circumstances of the two men, though the reflection that she would have more amusement with Mark than with Philip may have crossed her mind. She trusted Philip and respected his steady going, serious view of life. "I pleased her vanity, too, to feel how her nonsense and fun lightened his temperamental gravity, playing in and out and over it like a butterfly in a smoke bush. She would be safe with Philip always, but safety had no special charm for one of her age, who had never been in peril. Mark's superior knowledge of the world, moreover, his careless, buoyant manner of carrying himself, his gay, boyish audacity, all had a very distinct charm for her—and yet—"

But there would be no "and yet" a little later. Patty's heart would blaze quickly enough when sufficient heat was applied to it and Mark was fulling more and more deeply in love every day. As Patty vacillated his purpose strengthened, the more she weighed the more he ceased to weigh the difficulties of the situation, the more she unfolded herself to him the more he loved and the more he respected her. She began by delighting in his senses, she ended by winning all that there was in him and creating continually the qualities he lacked, after the manner of true women even when they are very young and foolish.

CHAPTER XVI.  
A STATE OF MAINE PROPHET.

SUMMER was dying hard, for although it had passed, by the calendar, Mother Nature was still keeping up her customary attitude.

There had been a soft rain in the night, and every spear of grass was brilliantly green and tipped with crystal. The smoke bushes in the garden plot and the asparagus bed beyond them looked misty as the sun rose higher, drying the soaked earth and dripping branches. Spiders' webs, marvelous of lace, dotted the short grass under the apple tree. Every flower that had a fragrance was pouring it gratefully into the air; every bird with a joyous note in its voice gave it more joyously from a bursting throat, and the river laughed and rippled in the distance at the foot of Town House hill. The dawn grew into full morning, and streams of blue smoke rose here and there from the Edgewood chimneys. The world was alive and so beautiful that Waitstill felt like going down on her knees in gratitude for having been born into it and given a chance of serving it in any humble way whatsoever.

Wherever there was a barn, in Riverboro or Edgewood, one could have heard the three-legged stools being lifted from the pegs, and then would begin the music of the milk pails; first the resonant sound of the stream in the bottom of the tin pail, then the soft, delicious purring of the cascade into the full bucket, while the cows serenely chewed their cud and whisked away the flies with swiftness of tails.

Deacon Baxter was taking his cows to a pasture far over the hill, the feed having grown too short in his own fields. Patty was washing dishes in the kitchen and Waitstill was in the dairy house at the butter making, one of her chief delights. She worked with speed and with beautiful sureness, patting, squeezing, rolling the golden mass like the true artist she was, then turning the sweet scented waxen balls out of the mould onto the big stone china

platter that stood waiting. She had been up early, and for the last hour she had led with devouring eagerness that she might have a little time to herself. It was hers now, for Patty would be busy with the beds after she finished the dishes, so she drew a fold-

ed paper from her pocket, the first communication she had ever received in Ivory's handwriting, and sat down to read it:

My Dear Waitstill—Rodman will take this packet and leave it with you when he finds opportunity. It is not in any real sense a letter, so I am in no danger of incurring your father's displeasure. You will probably have heard some rumors concerning my father during the past few days, for Mr. Morrill has been to Edgewood, N. H., where he says letters have been received stating that my father died in Cortland, O., more than five years ago. I shall do what I can to substantiate this fresh report, as I have always done with all the previous ones, but I have little hope of securing reliable information at this distance and after this length of time. I do not know when I can ever start on a personal quest myself, for even had I the money I could not leave home until I had removed her principal support, the subject of my quest. It is something more than mere friendship. What you are doing is like throwing a life line to a sinking human being. Two or three times of late mother has forgotten to eat, and I have helped her, dear mother! Would that I were free to tell you how I value your friendship! It is something more than mere friendship. What you are doing is like throwing a life line to a sinking human being. Two or three times of late mother has forgotten to eat, and I have helped her, dear mother! Would that I were free to tell you how I value your friendship! It is something more than mere friendship. What you are doing is like throwing a life line to a sinking human being. Two or three times of late mother has forgotten to eat, and I have helped her, dear mother! Would that I were free to tell you how I value your friendship! It is something more than mere friendship. What you are doing is like throwing a life line to a sinking human being. Two or three times of late mother has forgotten to eat, and I have helped her, dear mother! Would that I were free to tell you how I value your friendship! 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